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ABSTRACT

The current debate on educational reform includes many proposals to increase teacher participation in decision-making in order to make school policy and management more responsive to local needs. This paper argues that policy goals for teacher involvement should be geared to helping school staff, both teachers and administrators, meet the needs of all students. To achieve an appropriate balance between the authority of the school board and teacher autonomy, school policy should clearly define the decision-making process at both the district and building levels. Since teachers must also reconcile a desire for greater professional respect with their unions' resistance to professional standards, a board policy on staff involvement in decision-making should encourage teachers to develop a collective sense of professional responsibility. It also should grant principals the authority they need to define and achieve learning objectives. A clear commitment to student learning should guide any changes in school policy and organization, so participative decision-making policies should function within a clear policy framework defined by the school board. A series of subsidiary discussions are included in sidebars, including (1) a "shared governance" plan in a Pennsylvania school; (2) school based management; (3) "empowerment" and policy implications; (4) relating policy reforms to children's needs and to budget allocations; and (5) anticipated problems and benefits and suggestions for initiating reform. (TE)

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Volume 20/Number 3/March 1989

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The current debate on educational reform undoubtedly will produce some basic changes in the school policy and management process. But will the changes preserve the traditional authority relationships that exist among school boards, administrators, and teachers? Will the reforms focus on increasing learning opportunities and achievement for *all* students in *all* schools? Will decisionmaking remain public in terms of how policy is determined? As educators assess various reform proposals, the appropriate starting point is the decisionmaking process.

What reforms?

The current debate on educational reform includes an ample number of proposals to make the school policy and management process more effective and responsive to local needs. Recommendations from national education organizations, the U.S. Secretary of Education, scholars, think tanks, and various state-level commissions abound. For the most part, the reform proposals accept the theory that schools work best when teachers and principals are more involved in problem-solving at the building level (referred to as school- or site-based management). At the same time, reformers argue, school staff should be held accountable for producing measurable amounts of student learning.

Many of the proposals call for increased teacher participation in decisionmaking (teacher empowerment). Although reformers often link "restructured schools" to "teacher empowerment," these school management and policy concepts are better understood separately. "Restructuring" applies to a range of instructional, organizational, and curricular alternatives to traditional school operations. The two ideas might join forces if schools are "restructured" in a way to increase the contribution of teachers to policy and management decisions.

Power and excellence

Dale Mann, professor of educational administration at Columbia University, asks: "Should public policy outcomes be solely determined by that which is acceptable to some or even to all professionals?" He contends that in recent years a "policy by default" process has emerged in many school systems. Administrators asked teachers to do only what they were already willing to do. In such an environment, excellence emerges not as a result of collective efforts but as the result of individual teachers doing their job exceedingly well.

But, school boards and other public policymakers must enact policies designed to improve academic performance for *all* students, not just for those in the classrooms of excellent teachers. According to Mann, "Benefiting children requires more than effective teachers; it requires effective schools."

Forthcoming reforms, then, must do more than increase the influence of teachers in building-level and system-wide decisionmaking. Teachers, in many cases, might need and deserve a larger share of authority, but the policy goal should be greater than simply giving teachers more power. A policy on staff involvement in decisionmaking should help school staff—both teachers and administrators—effectively meet the needs of all pupils.

Who controls?

As the study of teaching produces more exact knowledge on what works in the classroom, the likelihood increases of a collision between teachers and school boards over who will control the schools. For example, standards for the entire teaching profession might have to be raised. Also subject to scrutiny is the relative importance of teacher autonomy and accountability, especially if more restrictions actually lead to improved student learning.

Who should control the schools? School boards derive their authority from the fact that community schools—in order to be *public*—must be controlled by the elected or appointed representatives of local citizens. Teachers, as the classroom conveyers of knowledge and skills to children, are indispensable elements of the school experience. School administrators, too, contribute the expertise and supervisory skills needed to educate large numbers of children in a complex world.

Teachers, as a group, are educated, caring, and know—perhaps better than anyone—what works in the classroom.

Moreover, what school boards ask of teachers is nothing short of a stewardship of society's future. This responsibility should carry the respect of those who oversee that stewardship on behalf of the public.

Effective participation in policy development is necessary in order for teachers to work as professionals. School boards will not be able to attract and retain the best teachers unless the school environment incorporates and nurtures staff involvement in decisionmaking.

Administrators and teachers both have legitimate roles to play in the policy process. But the school board, as the crucial link to the community, must balance the roles and ensure that authority is *appropriately* shared. Without that level of public accountability, the political landscape of the schools will lose many of the essential checks and balances of local control.

"If the lesson of the 1960s was that we could not drive the system from the top down, the lesson of the 1970s should be that neither can it be led from the bottom up .... The politics of school leadership has been too much about adult

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Patrick Phillips is coordinator of special projects for the Maine School Boards Association. This article was adapted from the November 1988 policy development newsletter distributed to school board chairmen and superintendents in Maine.

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working conditions and too little about children's learning conditions," says Mann.

Policy as the guide

Staff involvement in decisionmaking is a critical component of effective schools, both in terms of school board policy and building-level management. School policy should define clearly the decision-making process at both the district and building levels. Views of the professional teaching staff might be the most important factor considered by the school board or principal when making policy or management decisions. Nonetheless, professional staff should *contribute to*, not make, these decisions.

Before undertaking a school-based management reform, school boards should consider carefully the effect of "teacher empowerment" on the existing policy process. Board policy should identify the participants and set the guidelines. A staff involvement in decisionmaking policy offers school boards an opportunity to create a professional school environment where decisions are based on what best serves the learning needs of all pupils. By defining the respective roles of the school board, administrators, and teachers, board policy can establish a process for *appropriately* shared decisionmaking.

It is important for school policy to address this concern because many other groups have developed or are in the process of developing their own positions. The local teacher union probably would not speak out in favor of the board's role in this matter. State government, given the nature of politics, might be more concerned with developing an independent position on the subject. For school boards to continue as the vital link connecting communities to their schools, local boards must clearly specify the relative positions of the key decisionmakers.

Professional staff

Teachers as individuals must reconcile a desire for greater professional respect with their unions' overall resistance to the application of professional standards. In other words, teachers will achieve more professional stature only when the unions support measures to improve the effectiveness of *all* teachers. Most school systems encourage individual teacher excellence but at the same time must accept individual mediocrity.

Teachers will assume a fully professional role in decisionmaking only when all of the teachers in a school (a faculty) take responsibility for recognizing and remedying ineffective performance among their peers. When the creation of an effective *school* is the standard of success for each faculty member, then the teacher's split personality—as professional and union member—will be resolved in favor of the professional. A board policy on staff involvement in decisionmaking can encourage teachers in each school to develop a collective sense of professional responsibility.

Principal's leadership

Quality leadership at the building level is necessary for effective staff participation in decisionmaking. The principal must be prepared and encouraged to exert leadership on instructional issues. Only the principal has the authority and perspective to resolve problems and to keep reforms focused on student learning.

Relevant policy should describe the leadership role of the school principal. Also, an effective policy makes principals responsible for student learning in the school and then gives them the necessary authority to realize the objectives. Learning as well as teaching should be top school concerns.

Process and product

A clear commitment to student learning should guide any changes in school policy and organization. Too often in the past, experimentation occurred for its own sake. As school governance becomes more decentralized, school boards and administrators must ensure that quality information and research continue to be infused into building-level decisions. As reforms are implemented, adequate evaluation methods must be in place to keep the process acccountable and responsive to local needs.

Strengthened or expanded staff development programs offer the time and training necessary for teachers to hone their decision-making and peer evaluation skills. Acquiring such skills is crucial for effective participation in school management and policymaking.

Process and product are inseparable components of quality education. Indeed, the selection of a decision-making procedure is one of the critical choices a school board makes. However, concern about process must not divert attention from the need for real and measurable educational results.

Local control and reform

Without a broader consensus on the appropriate roles of school boards, administrators, and teachers, the chances are bleak for lasting school improvement. Boards should develop policies on staff involvement in decisionmaking that make schools accountable and responsive to local communities.

School boards might decide that greater participation by staff in building-level or system-wide decisions will help schools achieve their goals. However, this reform requires a clear policy framework. Only effective policy development and school board leadership can preserve local control of community schools in this age of educational reform. ■

Time to experiment

A "shared governance" plan in Easton (PA) schools involves teachers and administrators in a reform intended to professionalize the teacher workforce without eroding the authority of principals. Both the teacher union and school board approved the plan to expand staff involvement in areas as diverse as curriculum, student discipline, and personnel assignments.

The reform involves all levels of school governance. Union leaders representing the teachers' and principals' associations participate in school board meetings as well as the superintendent's cabinet. School planning councils (the principal and two elected teachers) contribute to decisions on curriculum, promotion criteria, discipline, and other policies. A joint professional senate consisting of a principal and one teacher delegate from each school discuss systemwide concerns. A joint personnel committee provides a forum for employee input on teaching transfers, assignments, and schedules.

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About school-based management . . . .

By any other name

All types of school-based reform—decentralization, site-based management, shared decisionmaking or governance, empowerment, restructuring, responsible autonomy, and school improvement or effectiveness—involve the transfer of at least some policy and budget authority from the school board and central administration to individual schools. In turn, building staff are held accountable for the learning achievments of students within their schools.

Reformers urge boards to give school staff more discretion over personnel, instructional and maintenance resources, curriculum, and scheduling. "Whatever it's called, the basic philosophy is this: a return of decisionmaking to the local school level . . . . it's the true return to the neighborhood school concept," says Barbara Parker (*The American School Board Journal*, July 1979).

School-based management offers an alternative approach to the traditional system of central board and administrative control. A decentralized network of relatively autonomous schools gives especially principals but also teachers, students, and parents more opportunity to affect the educational process.

However, the reforms vary. First, how much authority is transferred to local schools? Carl Marburger of the National Committee for Citizens in Education distinguishes between administrative and political forms of school-based management. In the administrative version, principals typically assume control of limited areas of a school's budget, personnel, and curriculum. In the political form, the distribution of power changes more radically. "The decision-making powers that formerly were the domain of school boards, superintendents, and central staff are shifted and shared with principals, teachers, parents, and students," says Marburger.

Second, which members of the school community should exercise authority?—The principal? Teachers? Parents? A school council representing community interests? Consider another issue: by what means should a school's progress toward goals be measured? (Most educators agree that indicators should reflect more than standardized test scores.) Still another concern: what action should be taken against schools showing inadequate progress?

School-based management reform would affect the traditional policy process. Making schools relatively autonomous units requires the revision or deletion of certain school policies that exclude teacher, parents, principals, and students from decisionmaking.

A range of policy options allows school boards to delegate either a small amount or a lot of authority to schools. According to the January 1989 issue of *Insights*, "In a self-managing school there is a comprehensive approach that links goal-setting, needs identification, policymaking, planning, budgeting, learning and teaching, and evaluating."

Some reformers propose to enlarge the decisionmaking circle even further. "Custodians are involved in solving custodial problems, teachers in solving classroom problems, principals in solving building-wide problems, and superintendents in making district-wide decisions," says Ronald Chiste (*NASSP Bulletin*, January 1989).

Others envision a stronger role for the school board and administration. Setting general policy guidelines, assuring system-wide equity and accountability, and providing a communications and resource network continue as important centralized functions.

Recent research on effective schools has prompted the "second wave of educational reform" focused on school-based management, staff leaders, effectiveness teams, strategic plans, school-based budgeting, and annual performance reports. Advocates contend that teachers and principals cannot create the ethos and school climate typical in "effective schools" unless they have wide-ranging decisionmaking power.

Advocates pin another hope to school-based reform. A system of autonomous but accountable schools might resolve the increasing tension between state mandates and local control.

Empowerment

Who will make the policy and management decisions that once were determined by the central staff and school board? The most likely prospect is teachers, predicts the School-Based Management Task Force convened in 1988 by the American Association of School Administrators, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (hereafter referred to as the Task Force). According to the Task Force report, "Today, school-based management is typically discussed in terms of empowering teachers. Certainly one of the most important advantages of this process is its ability to take full advantage of the expertise of all staff."

The prize is tempting enough to have convinced both major teacher unions to support their own versions of reform. In 1988 the National Education Association (NEA) launched a series of learning labs intended to restructure schools on the building level. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) endorsed "school within a school" experiments designed to encourage "building-level innovation, new instructional approaches, different methods of evaluation, and consensus building."

For many teachers the issue centers on professionalism and respect. "More than anything else," writes Joanna Schultz, president of the Michigan School Public Relations Association (in a recent issue of *New Jersey School Leader*), "they want administrators and school boards to show their respect by involving staff in the decision-making process . . . . This involvement means asking teachers what they think before the decision is made."

"Empowered" teachers will participate in decisions in such areas as school climate, student attendance, discipline, school resources, teaching methods and strategies, staff development, and goal setting.

"There was time, years ago, when there was some good reason not to invest a lot of trust in teachers," writes Edward Fiske (*The New York Times*, Nov. 2, 1988). "When mass public education developed in the late 19th century, the only available work force was young single women . . . . Teaching was necessarily portrayed as not a very complicated task, thus teachers could not be given much responsibility."

However, teacher empowerment poses several threats to school administration. Certainly it can blur the lines of authority and responsibility. Warns the Task Force, "It should lead to the empowerment of teachers, not just the further empowerment of teacher unions."

When school boards empower teachers, staff selection and transfer policies take on heightened importance. Some school-based management policies give principals (and sometimes school staff or an advisory council) control over hiring. Traditionally, union contracts, seniority, affirmative action plans, and other constraints have made the process centralized and rigid. Boards adopting school-based reform, in many cases, have been able to renegotiate their labor contracts. Either specific contract language is changed or the unions allow, on a school by school basis, waivers of specific provisions that would block school improvement.

Reformers hope to balance teacher and school autonomy with accountability. Many of the school-based management programs include plans to develop comprehensive student assessment and teacher evaluation systems.

Full empowerment depends on teachers who are able to participate effectively and who are willing to devote the extra time to planning and budget preparation, staff development, and committee work. In more limited reforms, administrators might only have to consult with teachers before making decisions.

Before developing policy in this area, boards should assess what type of participation teachers are demanding. Do they want to be involved in board-level and administrative decisions? Or is the focus on building-level concerns? Perhaps teachers want assurance that the current process will be more sensitive to classroom priorities.

What about the children?

Schools searching for ways to meet the learning needs of all children also are turning to school-based management. Learning needs are varied; therefore school staff need access to diverse instructional approaches, curricula, and resources.

A board policy on curriculum simply would refer to goals, objectives, and expected outcomes. School decisionmakers determine what staff assignments, methods, and instructional resources will best meet the educational needs.

Some U.S. businesses are encouraging public schools to try the same bottom-up participatory management style that has worked successfully in the private sector. For instance, Boston corporate leaders convinced the schools to share more authority with teachers in return for the companies' promise to hire more high school graduates.

What needs reforming?

"In some school systems, a teacher cannot rearrange the seats in the classroom without committing an infraction of district policy. Both teachers and principals complain about centralized policies that require them to fill out stacks of paper but make it next to impossible for them to get tablets of paper for their students," reports the Oct. 12, 1988 issue of *Education Week*.

Principals, too, are hamstrung by having limited amounts of authority to manage school personnel, curriculum, and operations. Instead of acting as school leader, says William Bennett in *American Education: Making It Work*, the principal of an ordinary school in a sizeable system is a middle-manager who attained the position through "increments of seniority and credentialism. Virtually no public secondary school principals have genuine authority over teacher salaries, bonuses, or supplements. Only 8 percent control teacher performance standards; 11 percent make teacher assignments to their schools; and 13 percent control their schools' budgets."

New ways to budget

School-based management depends on some degree of school-based budgeting. Usually, administrators determine the funds available to the school system for the year; subtract the costs for programs under central control, such as administration and transportation; and allocate the remaining funds—in a lump sum amount—to each school.

Schools, in collaboration with the board, develop school-specific and district priorities. Then each school determines how to spend its funding allocation in order to achieve the annual objectives.

To reflect the costs of educating different kinds of children, a building allocation formula should take into account both the number and special needs of pupils in each school. For example, the "cost to educate" a child could be as low as $2,650 per pupil or as high as $18,579 for autistic and deaf students.

To encourage long-range planning and efficiency, reformers recommend that schools be allowed to carry over any surplus funds to the next year or to transfer the money to another program.

Anticipate these problems

- The amount of cooperation and power sharing required could make school-based management unworkable.
- Current measures of student and school progress are not precise enough to determine accountability.
- Reform efforts run up against the "real sludge of inertia in education" that James McPartland (director of the Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools) says is due to the conservativeness of educators and the political and economic forces affecting schools.
- The lines blur between the authority and responsibility of supervisors and employees.
- The slowness of shared decisionmaking frustrates the participants. Unless sufficient time is allocated for staff planning and preparation, the process will bog down even more. Another obstacle: not all teachers will be interested in the budget process or want to devote the extra time.
- The school board is pressured to destaff the central administration.
- Some collective bargaining agreements could limit areas of reform.
- Some districts need to assure the state legislature and the department of education that objectives of the state program would be achieved, but without following state-mandated procedures.

Expect these benefits

- Teacher morale and support will improve.
- Accountability will focus on building-level staff.
- Teachers, other staff members, parents, and citizens will be more involved in the schools.
- New leaders will emerge throughout the schools.
- The communication process within schools will improve.
- Teachers will incorporate a greater variety of instructional approaches and resources.
- Schools will become more efficient and productive, in part because staff, students, and community members help to identify ways of cutting operational costs and improving the delivery of services.

Ready to start, now what?

- The Task Force recommends that school boards follow these steps: develop awareness of the reform throughout the school system; openly discuss school readiness; survey and assess readiness by forming broad-based committees; set goals and objectives; develop a timeline with sufficient lead time; select an implementation approach; train staff; implement; monitor; evaluate; and adjust.

Remember:

- Building-level staff need expertise and commitment. Plan for initial and ongoing district support, training, new budgeting practices, time for full implementation, access to information, and open communication.
- The board and superintendent must support and trust school principals and school councils.
- A memorandum of agreement should specify the roles and responsibilities of decisionmakers; the standards of accountability applied to each school; and the contents of the school performance and planning reports submitted annually for board approval.
- School systems should develop their own mechanisms to promote diversity yet maintain some commonality among schools.
- School boards and administrators must focus on performance not procedure.